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ABSTRACT

Most Americans view small towns and rural areas as ideal places to grow up and raise a family, yet 1990 census data reveal that most rural areas are losing population, particularly the young. Teenagers who live in rural communities are likely to have important insights into this contradiction. Approximately 5,600 students attending 114 rural high schools in Illinois completed a questionnaire about their community, school, and plans for the future. Questions covered such areas as advantages and disadvantages of the rural community, community problems, quality of local high school education, postsecondary plans, availability and popularity of vocational courses, participation in extracurricular activities, plans to stay in or leave the community, career aspirations, interest in self-employment and entrepreneurship, and teens' monthly spending habits. While young people were not immune to the charms of small communities, many planned to leave because they perceived a lack of well-paying jobs. Even though good jobs are more difficult to find in rural areas than they were 10 years ago, the decline in employment opportunities has not been steep enough to justify the degree of pessimism exhibited by most rural teens. First and foremost, the quality of rural educational systems must be maintained or improved. In addition, teens must be made aware of the local job opportunities that do exist; in attracting jobs, rural community leaders must recognize the types of jobs that appeal to the young and better educated; and local schools should offer courses in how to start and run one's own business. Communities that maintain a high-quality telecommunications network will find themselves at a distinct advantage to attract higher-paying service companies. Finally, the superior quality of family life rural communities can offer may tip the scales in their favor. (TD)

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GROWING UP IN RURAL ILLINOIS

ILLINOIS RURAL YOUTH SURVEY SUMMARY REPORT

Published by the Illinois Institute for Rural Affairs
Western Illinois University
518 Stipes Hall
Macomb, Illinois 61455

June, 1993

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Illinois Rural Youth Survey
Summary Report

Published by the Illinois Institute for Rural Affairs

Western Illinois University
518 Stipes Hall
Macomb, Il 61455
(309) 298-2237

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Growing Up in Rural Illinois

Most Americans view small towns and rural areas as ideal places to grow up and raise a family; places where streets are safe, children play without fear, and teenagers prepare for adulthood without the constant pressure of gangs, drugs, and violence that so many of their urban counterparts face. These qualities should give families that reside in rural America a strong incentive to stay, and serve as a powerful lure for those families who have become disenchanted with urban areas. Yet 1990 census data reveals that most rural areas are losing population, particularly the young. Why this apparent contradiction?

A group likely to have important insight into this phenomenon is teenagers who live in rural communities. Do they feel that their community has been a good place to grow up, or are the common perceptions about life in small communities merely a delusion? Do they plan to stay in their community once they have finished their high school education? If not, why are they leaving? To shed some light on these questions, Community Research Services at Illinois State University conducted a survey of rural high school students in Illinois for the Illinois Institute for Rural Affairs and the office of Lieutenant Governor Bob Kustra.

Approximately 5,600 students attending 114 different rural high schools in Illinois, with the cooperation of their principals and teachers, were asked to complete a questionnaire about their community, their school, and their plans for the future. These students were enrolled in a Spring, 1993 section of an American History or American Government class; they thus provided a cross-section of both college bound and non-college bound students. Most of these students were in their junior year of high school; the vast majority (85 percent) plan to continue their education past high school. Approximately half were male and half were female.

What Is it Like Growing Up In a Rural Community Today?

Although adults may tend to romanticize their childhoods, teens are much more likely to provide an unsentimental assessment of their growing-up years. In a broad sense, most rural teens would agree that their community is a *good* place to raise children. Only 8 percent of students disagreed with the statement "this community is a good place to raise children;" 71 percent agreed (the remaining 21 percent felt neutral). What do these teens see as the best things about where they live? Close friends and family, the fact that "everybody knows everybody else," and "not much crime" were all items cited by more than half of the students. It would thus appear that the conventional view of small-town living—friendly people, close-knit families, and low crime rates—is supported by most rural teenagers. These are also things likely to keep young people close, or draw them back if they leave.

Not surprisingly these teens also see a downside to small-town living. More than 80 percent said that "nothing to do" in their community is one of the worst things about where they live now. This was probably the most immediate concern to teens. A more troubling matter, of much more consequence over the long-term and mentioned almost as frequently was "no job opportunities." The concern of these teens is well-founded; total employment in metropolitan Illinois increased 11.5 percent between 1980 and 1990 while nonmetropolitan Illinois saw a decrease in employment of more than 1 percent.[1] This is a looming problem that in the view of some rural youths eliminates the possibility of remaining in their community.

[1]Jeff R. Crump, "The Changing Employment Structure of Nonmetropolitan Illinois, 1980-1990", *Rural Research Report*, Spring 1993, p. 3.

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Gangs have apparently made little headway among youth in rural areas; more than nine of ten students completing the survey reported that gang activities are either no problem or only a small problem in their community. Drug problems are somewhat more prevalent, although more than half of the students also characterized drugs as either no problem or only a small problem. Alcohol is clearly the drug of choice among rural youths as shown in Figure 1; most teens see alcohol abuse as either a moderate or serious problem among youth in their community.

Figure 1
Problems Among Youths in Rural Communities

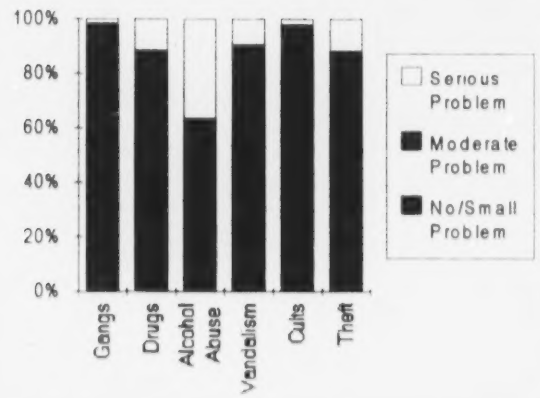
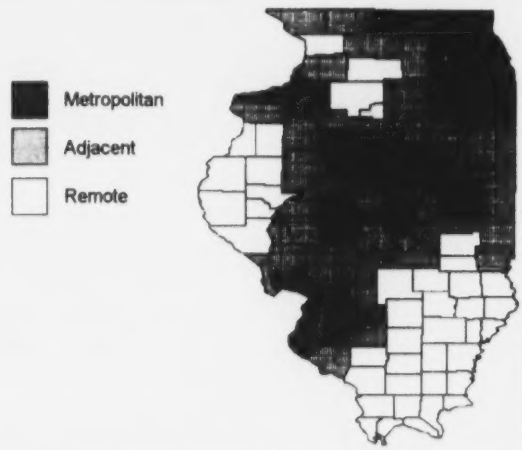


Figure 2 shows counties in Illinois classified as either "metropolitan," "adjacent," (a rural county adjacent to a metropolitan county), or "remote" (a rural county surrounded by other rural counties). Approximately half of the students were located in an "adjacent" rural county; the other half were located in a "remote" rural county. Geographic location based on proximity to a metropolitan area did have some affect on the extent of gang and drug problems in the county.

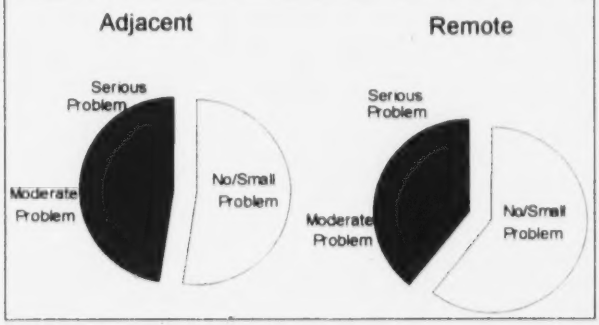
Neither rural county classification had a high percentage of students reporting serious or moderate gang problems, however, students in a county adjacent to a metropolitan area were less likely to report that gangs were *no* problem in their community (73 percent) than students in a remote rural county (81 percent), and more likely to report that gangs were a *small* problem (20 percent vs. 14 percent, respectively). This could be an indication that gangs are beginning to gain a foothold in those communities near urban areas. The extent of drug problems among youth

Figure 2
Metropolitan, Adjacent, and Remote Counties



was also greater in adjacent counties (Figure 3). There was no difference between remote and adjacent counties in the seriousness of alchol abuse problems. Students in remote counties were slightly more likely to report that vandalism was a serious problem, and slightly more likely to report that cults were a small problem as opposed to no problem.

Figure 3
Drug Problems in Adjacent And Remote Rural Counties



It might be expected that teens from remote rural counties would see lack of things to do as more of a problem in their community. This was not the case, however; the percentage of students citing "nothing to do" as one of the worst things about their community for both adjacent and rural counties was very similar (82 percent and 80 percent, respectively). When asked to list the best and worst things about their community, the largest differences (5 to 7

percent) occurred on the items "everybody knows everybody else" and "family is close." Teens living in remote rural counties were more likely to list "everybody knows everybody else" and "family is close" as one of the *best* things about their community, and were less likely to list them as one of the worst. The reason for these differences is not immediately clear, although it may be a reflection of a tendency for those in more isolated rural communities to rely more heavily on other community members and family members for support.

What Do Rural High School Students Say About Local Education?

A major concern in some rural communities is the ability of the local school district to educate its children—particularly in high school, when advanced courses may not be available due to limited funds and/or enrollments. Most school districts are doing a satisfactory job according to teens who completed the survey; only 13 percent of the students disagreed with the statement "the local school district does a good job of educating children;" 57 percent agreed and the remainder were neutral. Six of ten students believed that their high school education is giving them the skills they need, but the remaining forty percent did not. This was true regardless of student career plans. The most frequently cited reasons for dissatisfaction with their high school education were (in descending order):

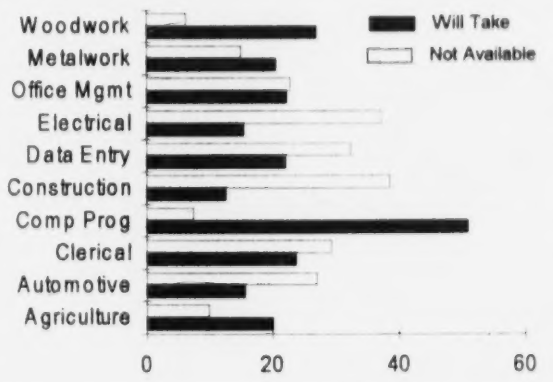
-Teachers aren't very interesting
-Counseling is not very good
-Can't get college preparatory courses I want
-Teachers don't cover right things
-School building and or equipment is not very good
-Can't get college preparatory courses I need
-Not enough extra-curricular activities.

Most students felt that the courses they need to *enter* college are available, but a significant proportion (29 percent) was concerned about courses they need to *compete* in college. This probably reflects the fact that nearly all rural schools manage to offer basic "college preparatory" courses, but some do not have the resources to offer much in the way of advanced courses. Also, regardless of the reality of rural education, if students *perceive* that they cannot compete, rural areas will find it difficult to retain families.

These same schools may also have difficulty offering a variety of vocational courses, although responses to the youth survey indicate that rural schools are satisfying most students' needs for vocational courses. This question has particular relevance for those students who plan to seek full-time employment immediately upon graduation from high school or who plan to attend a one- or two-year technical or vocational college. Only 13 percent of all students disagreed with the statement "local high school students can get the vocational courses they need to get a good job." This percentage was roughly the same (between 12 and 14 percent) for those students who plan to enter the work force immediately after high school, for those who plan to train for a career which would require some additional schooling but less than a four-year degree, and for those who plan to train for a career that would require at least four years of college. Seven of ten rural high school students have classes at a regional vocational center available to them.

Most students felt that they can get the courses they need to <u>enter</u> college, but a significant proportion was concerned about getting the courses they need to <u>compete</u> in college.

Figure 4
Availability/Popularity of Vocational Courses



Many rural high schools participate in a cooperative education program that provides local high school students with the opportunity for on-the-job training at local businesses. Such programs can be particularly beneficial to

both schools and businesses in rural communities, since schools may not have the funds or facilities to provide adequate vocational training and local businesses may have a limited pool of qualified workers. Approximately 38 percent of students indicated that their school participates in a cooperative education program with local businesses. The true percentage may be much higher since 45 percent of the students weren't sure if their school participates in such a program or not. Approximately 12 percent of the students actually participated in such a program.

A fairly large number (44 percent) of the students felt neutral about the statement "teachers in the local school district are paid adequately," an indication that many have little or no knowledge of pay rates for teachers. Students strongly supported the idea that teachers should have to pass a competency test to teach in the state of Illinois (70 percent agreed; only 5 percent disagreed). They were much less likely to believe that students in Illinois should have to pass a competency test to graduate from high school (only 32 percent agreed).

Extracurricular activities are an important aspect of the high school experience in a small community, and one that probably contributes heavily to the feeling of community that most rural youths seem to value.

A number of students indicated a desire for more extracurricular activities in the high school. The participation rate for available activities was extremely high; only 6 percent of the students have not participated in an extracurricular activity; more than half (56 percent) participated in three activities or more. Figures 5 and 6 show the rate of student involvement in activities. Any extracurricular offering in a small school must have a high percentage of students involved if it is to succeed. Students are also likely to play a more meaningful role in the activity than in a larger school. This is an important aspect of the high school experience in a small community, and one that probably contributes heavily to the feeling of community that most rural youths seem to value. In the sense that extracurricular activities play a part in the lives of such a high percentage of rural high school students, and that "nothing to do" is a common problem for rural teens, extracurricular activities are more important in rural high schools than they might be in a larger school.

Figure 5
Extracurricular Participation

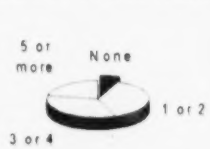
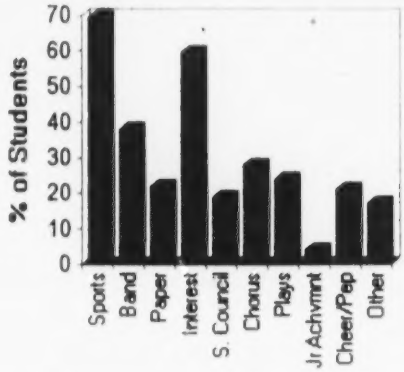


Figure 6
Participation In Various Extracurricular Activities



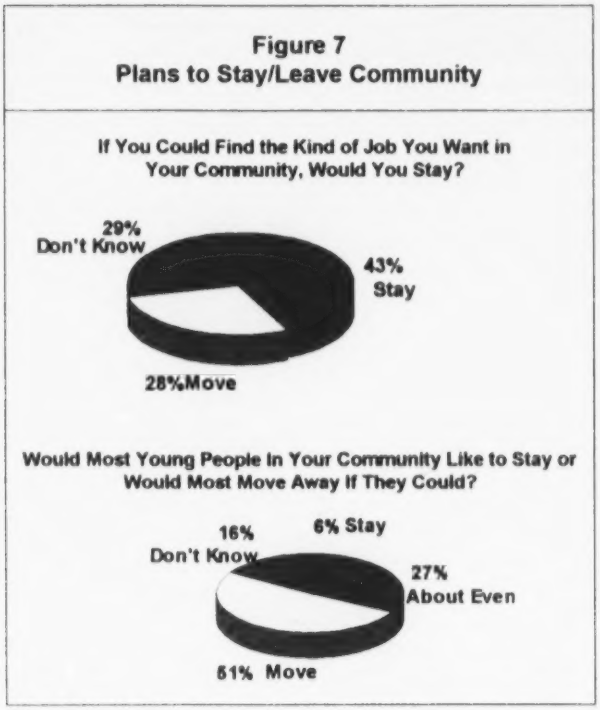
What About Future Plans?

It is apparent from results of this survey that in spite of the generally positive feelings teens have about their community, most expect to leave after completing their education. The predominant reason for this planned exodus is a lack of suitable jobs. Only 17 percent believe they will be able to find the kind of job they want in their community. One of the most significant findings is that many students would stay in their community *if* they could find the kind of job they want (Figure 7).

A more subtle factor that may affect young people's decisions to leave is peer pressure. It is interesting to note that although only 28 percent of the students said they would leave their community even if they could find the kind of job they want, the majority felt that most other young people would leave if they could. The perception that *other* young people plan to leave, whether it is accurate or not, could affect the decision of some youths who might otherwise be inclined to stay in their community. Rural teens see "close friends" as one of the best things about their community; the prospect that many of these friends will be

living somewhere else in the future would certainly make the community seem less attractive.

Figure 7
Plans to Stay/Leave Community


If You Could Find the Kind of Job You Want in Your Community, Would You Stay?
29% Don't Know
43% Stay
28% Move
Would Most Young People In Your Community Like to Stay or Would Most Move Away If They Could?
16% Don't Know
6% Stay
27% About Even
51% Move

Many rural high school students have already had a negative experience with the job market in their community. Although 41 percent have a part-time job, another 23 percent would like a part-time job but can't find one. Rural teens are well aware that most good jobs require some training or education beyond high school; few plan to go directly to work after graduating. They also know that the vast majority of such jobs are located in more urban areas; realizing that they will not be able to pursue their chosen career locally they make plans based on that assumption.

What kinds of careers do these teens aspire to? The most popular career choices require at least four years of college. More than four of ten students listed a professional career such as doctor, lawyer, teacher, architect, nurse, journalist, etc. as their first choice of occupation. Other popular choices were technical careers (i.e., computer programmers or lab technicians), precision production or craft occupations (auto or appliance repair, plumbers, electricians, etc.,), protective service or managerial occupations. Clearly, the preferred professions of most students (with the possible exception of teaching or craft occupations) would in all likelihood require them to relocate to a larger community.

How much do they expect to make annually in their first full-time job? Those students planning to go on to college expect a mean annual salary of approximately $32,000.[2] Most (92 percent) also expect to pay more to live in a larger community.

Jobs and higher earnings are not the only things that lure rural youth away from their community, however. Nine of ten students said that "to get a good job" was a good reason to move away, but five of ten also said that "more things to do" might be a good reason to leave. "To be on my own" and "to get away from home" were also popular reasons to move.

The Entrepreneurial Spirit

One encouraging survey result was the number of high school students showing an interest in starting and running their own business. Many students (44 percent) said that they had already considered the possibility, and nearly two-thirds (64 percent) would be interested in taking a course on how to start and run your own business. Rural communities rely heavily on small businesses for their economic vitality, and the large number of young people who have considered small business ownership was promising. This is potentially a tremendous source of employment since new, small businesses generate more than half of the new jobs in an economy.[3] Most new industries in a community are begun by local residents, and these young potential entrepreneurs are a community asset to be nurtured. The concept of a high school course on the mechanics of starting and running your own business is particularly intriguing given the high level of interest and the potential benefits for the community. How many enter-

[2]The mean for those students who do *not* plan to continue their education past high school was more than $34,000. This obvious overestimation probably resulted from a combination of factors: some unrealistic expectations, a few ridiculously high estimations, and a smaller number of responses since the vast majority of students *do* plan to continue their education. This conjecture is supported by the large standard deviation of over $60,000 obtained for the salary figure for students who do not plan to attend college.

[3]John J. Gruidl and Randy I. Anderson, "Jobs in the Year 2005: How Will Rural Illinois Communities Fare?," *Rural Research Report*, Winter 1993, p. 7.

prises die in their infancy, not because the idea was unprofitable or unworkable, but because the potential entrepreneur was bewildered by the idea of business start-

Many students have considered the possibility of running their own business, and nearly two-thirds would be interested in taking a course on how to start and run your own business.

up and ownership? Some kinds businesses the students indicated they might like to start were professional service organizations, other service businesses, retail stores, autobody/service enterprises, restaurants or hotels, and construction businesses.

Rural Teenagers as Consumers

There were several types of businesses and recreation facilities the teens would like to see in their community that aren't there now. More than two-thirds of the students do not have a movie theater in their community, but would like to have one. About half do not have a fast-food restaurant but would like one. Other popular requests were for a record/tape store (56 percent), clothing store (48 percent), teen center (49 percent) and video arcade (38 percent).

Some of these desires are not feasible. For example, McDonald's would be unlikely to build a restaurant in a town of 500. Other desires, especially for entertainment establishments, might fall within the realm of possibility —especially if scaled-down versions are considered. For example, although a first-run movie theater may not be possible, a theater that runs older releases might survive. A public facility could also be used for a weekly showing of movies selected for appeal to teenagers.

Store managers would be well-served by paying attention to consumer preferences of teens. Business owners may tend to dismiss teenage spending as insignificant, but monthly spending of rural teens is far from inconsequential —particularly when money spent outside of the community is taken into account (Table 1). More than six of ten students reported that they have their own car, and this high mobility is reflected in their spending habits. The students reported spending an average of approximately $33.00 more per month outside of their community than they spend within their community. The only specific items they were more likely to purchase within their community were gas and food.

Table 1
Student Monthly Spending

Item	Average Monthly Amount Spent In Community	Average Monthly Amount Spent Outside of Community
Gas	$31.72	$17.95
Clothes	$15.87	$44.81
Entertainment	$18.51	$25.43
Food	$34.04	$32.87
Tapes, CDs, etc.	$8.18	$17.23
Personal Items	$12.44	$15.32
Total	$120.76	$153.61

Conclusions

Youths in rural Illinois counties leave because there are not enough good-paying jobs to retain them. This is not an earth-shattering conclusion nor even a new one. Employment statistics of the past ten years demonstrate that rural areas have suffered blows to their economies. What is of interest is the fact that rural communities have managed to remain friendly, close-knit, and relatively crime-free in spite of these challenges and, perhaps more importantly, that young people are not immune to the charm a small community can offer.

One question rural communities must tackle is how to maintain a superior quality of life. First and foremost, the quality of educational systems must be maintained, and in some cases improved. At the high school level this involves not only a variety of course offerings but also the availability and quality of extracurricular activities. Community

leaders and school officials should make every effort to provide local activities for teens. Rural communities have thus far managed to keep teenage criminal activities at a level far below urban communities. But "nothing to do" is the number one complaint raised by rural teenagers about their community, and may be a chief factor in the high level of alcohol abuse among teens. If rural communities are to continue to keep gangs and drugs at arms length, teens must be offered other activities to fill their time.

A more sobering conclusion is that as most young people plan their future, they assume that they will have to leave their community to pursue the career of their choice. Although this may be true in some cases; good jobs are undeniably more difficult to find in rural areas than they were ten years ago; the decline in employment opportunities has not been steep enough to justify the degree of pessimism exhibited by most rural teens. This suggests that local officials, school administrators, and employers need to do a better job of making teens aware of the job opportunities that *do* exist locally. As long as young people continue to perceive that there are no job opportunities in their community, whether it is an accurate perception or not, rural communities will continue to lose their youngest members at an accelerated rate.

The days when Mike or Chris could graduate from high school and get a job locally as an auto mechanic have disappeared; odds are that they will have to go to a technical school for at least a year to learn about the complex electrical and computer systems that run most cars today.

Obviously rural communities also need to attract more jobs, but community leaders must recognize the *types* of jobs that are likely to appeal to the young and better-educated, and of the changing nature of the job market. The days when small factories and agricultural enterprises dominated rural economies are gone, as are the kinds of jobs they were likely to offer. The days when Mike or Chris could graduate from high school and get a job locally as an auto mechanic have also disappeared. Odds are that they will have to go to a technical school for at least a year to learn about the complex electrical and computer systems that run most cars today. When they are through with their education they will seek work in a garage large enough to purchase the expensive diagnostic equipment required.

Rural communities will have to work harder to keep their young. Of course goals and career plans change; some teens who plan to leave will stay, others may return in the future. Some who plan to stay will end up leaving, possibly because they were unable to find a job in the field of their choice. But most rural teens seem to have a firm grasp of what will be required of them if they are to succeed economically –this is evident from the number who plan to continue their education past high school. And, unfortunately for rural areas, it is also evident from the number who plan to eventually locate in a larger community.

Where should community leaders focus if they want to keep the next generation employed locally? Industries that are likely to offer the most job-growth opportunity for rural areas in coming years are wholesale trade, insurance and real estate, and export services in the fields of health, business, social and legal services, engineering, and architecture. Some manufacturing enterprises may see slight job growth, particularly if they serve export markets.[4] Retail trade and consumer services should also grow, although job growth in these sectors is less desirable since they offer predominantly low-wage jobs.

The interest and enthusiasm that young people in rural communities have for starting their own businesses is an asset that rural communities cannot afford to squander. Most new firms are initiated by local residents. Community leaders must be careful not to aim all of their economic development efforts at attracting outside firms while ignoring local residents. Local high schools should also consider offering a course in how to start and run your own business. Interest in the subject is high among rural high school students, and local communities will eventually reap economic benefits.

Most growth in the American economy has been in the service sector over the past ten to fifteen years. This is true in both rural and urban areas, but while much of the service sector growth in urban counties has been in higher-paying fields such as finance and insurance, service sector growth

[4]John J. Gruidl and Randy I. Anderson, "Jobs in the Year 2005: How Will Rural Illinois Communities Fare?" *Rural Research Report*, Winter 1993, pp. 4-5.

in rural areas has been in businesses such as restaurants that pay little and offer few benefits. To date it has been difficult for rural areas to attract the higher-paying service companies, but improved technology and telecommunications equipment could make this more feasible in the coming decades. The number of telelinked businesses is increasing, and communities that maintain a high-quality telecommunications network will find themselves at a distinct advantage in the competition for these businesses. The superior quality of family life rural communities can offer may then tip the scales in their favor.

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For complete results of the Illinois Rural Youth Survey, contact Community Research Services, Illinois State University, at the above address.
Supported by the Office of Lieutenant Governor Bob Kustra

The Illinois Rural Youth Survey

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